Even a simple question like this (assuming your respondents know the answer and are willing to tell you) can lead to messy data. Will respondents write 90 kgs, 198 lbs, or 14 stone? Of course you can convert these answers to one system, but that isn't going to be possible if they just put 90.

CHOOSING FROM A LIST

4. *What would you drink most often?*

Beer *Wine* *Spirits* *Mixed drinks* *Cocktails*

There is an assumption here that there will not be any 'ties'; you need to consider what you will do if more than one option is circled. You also need to make sure all options are covered. A potential strategy is to offer an *'other'* or *'other:_____'* option.

ORDERING OPTIONS

5. *Please place the following drinks in order of preference*

Beer *Wine* *Spirits* *Mixed drinks* *Cocktails*

These questions have been found to be quite difficult for respondents, particularly if lists are long. It is worth remembering that if respondents get frustrated trying to answer your question, they are likely to leave the question blank, leave it half finished, or just write anything at all.

LIKERT TYPE SCALING:

6. *It is normal for teenagers to binge drink*

1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*

Likert scales offer a range of responses generally ranging from something like 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. In Likert scaling you need to consider: the number of points you will use; whether you will force a side; and whether you think respondents will 'get on a roll' and keep circling a particular number.

Information and instruction

Providing clear background information and lucid instructions is an essential part of good survey instrument construction.

- *Offering information* – surveys need to include some background information that identifies the sponsor/university; clarifies the survey's purpose; assures anonymity/confidentiality; provides return information, including deadlines and return address; and offers thanks for time/assistance. This information can be included at the start of the survey or as a cover letter or e-mail.

- *Providing instruction* – what might be self-evident to you, may not be so obvious to your respondents. Your instructions should introduce each section of the survey instrument; give clear and specific instructions for each question type; provide examples; and be easy to distinguish from the actual survey questions – in fact it's a good idea to use a different font. It may take a couple of drafts to get your instructions as clear and helpful as possible, and it's advisable to ask your peers/supervisor if your instructions do the job. However, the real test will come when you pilot the instrument, review the data, and seek feedback from your pilot participants.

Organization and length

Once the elements of your survey are complete, you need to think about putting it together in a logical order that covers it all without being overly lengthy.

- *Length* – instruments considered too long can be abandoned, returned incomplete, or filled in at random. I once filled in a survey for a gourmet chicken shop in order to get a free piece of chicken (well I was a poor student at the time). This thing turned out to be, no lie, nine pages long. How many finger-licking chicken questions can you answer? For me it turned out to be all of them (I wasn't leaving without my Kiev), but I think I was supposed to actually read the questions before ticking the boxes!
- *Organization* – you are likely to find contradictory advice on whether to start or end with demographics, and where to place your most important questions. A lot of this depends on the nature of both your questions and your respondents; and you may want to pilot two different versions of your questionnaire if you are unsure how to lay it all out. One tried and true piece of advice, however, is that you don't want to start your survey with any questions that might be considered threatening. It is important to ease your respondents into your survey and save sensitive question for near the end.

Layout and design

You'd think that all of the intense intellectual work that has gone into writing clear and unambiguous questions with appropriate, well thought out response categories that are accompanied by clear instruction and organized into a sensitive, logical, and manageable form would be enough to ensure a 'good' survey. Not quite. Aesthetics counts!

If your survey looks unprofessional (for example, poor photocopies, faint printing, messy and uninteresting layout etc.), two things can happen. First, respondents will be less likely to complete a survey that is unprofessional and lacking an aesthetically pleasing layout and design. Second, the potential for mistakes increases dramatically if surveys are cluttered, cramped, or messy.

INTERVIEWING

I'm going to start my discussion of interviewing with another point of clarification. When I talk about interviewing, I am referring to a process with the following definition:

Interviewing: A method of data collection that involves researchers asking respondents basically *open-ended* questions.

The reason I want to make this clear is that some methods texts class any verbal researcher–respondent questioning process as an interview, including the administration of telephone and face-to-face questionnaires. Now while in its most structured form an interview can be quite similar to a face-to-face survey, interviews tend to rely on open-ended questions for the majority of data collected.

Interviewing in all its complexity

If you've just finished reading the section on surveying, you may be thinking, 'Ok, that's pretty involved. Interviewing may be an easier option.' Well, not really. First, interviewing needs to be the right method for addressing your particular research question. And assuming that it is the right method, it's important to realize that interviewing has its own issues and complexities, and demands its own type of rigour.

The complexities of people

What's the biggest barrier to gathering credible data through the interview process? That's easy – it's people. People (researchers included) are complex, complicated, and sometimes convoluted; and the interview process demands a high level of engagement with others. In an interview, the researcher is reliant on the interviewee to provide honest and open answers, yet we know that people want to be liked, want to maintain a sense of dignity, and want to protect some level of privacy. If respondents feel judged, ashamed or offended, or, on the other hand, deferential or awestruck, gathering credible data is far from assured. Basic attributes such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, and age, of interviewer and interviewee alike, can also affect the interview process (see Chapter 4). The bigger the 'gulf' between interviewer and interviewee the greater the chance it will influence the interview process.

Complexities of communications

Interviewing is often aligned with conversation. But in actuality, interviewing is a very specific form of communication that is much more complex than simply asking a question and taking note of an answer. Questions move from the mind to the lips of the interviewer, before moving to the ears of an interviewee, who filters the question through mental processes, before articulating any answers. The interviewer must then hear what has been said, and use their own mental processes to take in and interpret meaning. From forming ideas to the articulation of those ideas, from hearing others to making sense of what they are saying, the question and answer (Q&A) process is rife with the potential for miscommunication. Box 11.5 highlights how difficult it can be to ensure that the interview process does not lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

Box 11.5 *It's just Q&A, isn't it?*

	From A to K	**Getting lost along the way...**
The Interviewer	A. *formulates a question*	**A to B:** Your thoughts and words do not always match up.
	B. *asks the question*	**B to C:** Respondents can simply mishear. Accents, language difficulties/interpreters can make this quite common.
	C. *hears the question*	**C to D:** Respondents don't always share the same understandings as the interviewer.
The Respondent	D. *interprets the meaning*	**D to E:** Respondents can intentionally filter/hide/lie or simply forget.
	E. *considers a response*	**E to F:** Again, words do not always capture thoughts.
	F. *articulates an answer*	**F to G:** Interviewers also have the potential to mishear. If taping, make sure audio is of adequate quality.
	G. *hears the response*	**G to H:** The more 'foreign' the culture the more potential for divergent interpretation.
The Interviewer	H. *interprets the meaning*	**H to I:** Note-taking is not easy. You can miss significant information. You can also lose data in the transcription process.
	I. *takes notes*	**I to J:** Judgements/interpretations need to be made by the interviewer.
	J. *synthesizes/analyzes*	**J to K:** The interviewer reports back understandings as truth!!!
	K. *reports*	

Interview basics

When it comes to conducting an interview there are a number of options, each with its own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limitations. An early challenge is determining what type of interview is most suited to your research question.

Interviews can range in type from fixed to free:

Structured: At one end of the spectrum is the fully structured interview that uses pre-established questions, asked in a predetermined order, using a standard mode of delivery. Means for prompting and probing the interviewee are predetermined and used in defined circumstances. Researchers attempt to be objective, neutral, and removed, and try to minimize personal interactions. The goal is standardization without improvisation.

Semi-structured: As the name suggests, these interviews are neither fully fixed nor fully free, and are perhaps best seen as flexible. Interviewers generally start with some defined questioning plan, but pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order more natural to the flow of conversation. They may also start with a few defined questions but be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that may develop.

Unstructured: At the other end of the spectrum is the unstructured interview that attempts to draw out information, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs around particular themes, ideas, and issues without the aid of predetermined questions. To do this, interviewers use a more conversational style and attempt to prompt, probe, and develop questions on the spot as is appropriate to the ongoing conversation.

Interviews also vary in their level of formality:

Formal: A formal interview is just that, formal. Perhaps the best analogy is the classic job interview that includes: the office setting; the formal handshake; appropriate attire; order and structure; and best professional behaviour. There are defined roles and there is deference to those roles. The interviewer role includes being somewhat removed from the interviewee and maintaining neutrality/objectivity. While it is possible to conduct an unstructured interview in a formal manner, formal interviews are generally structured.

Informal: An informal interview attempts to ignore the rules and roles associated with interviewing in an attempt to establish rapport, gain trust, and create a more natural environment conducive to open and honest communication. It is a casual and relaxed form of interviewing that attempts to close the gulf between the researcher and the researched. The setting for an informal interview is not limited to an office and might occur over a beer at the pub, or while having a cup of coffee at a mother's group. Informal interviews are often unstructured, but this varies with the style, comfort zone, and goals of the researcher.

Finally, interviewing can be done one-on-one, or in groups:

One-on-one: Most interviews are an interaction between the interviewer and a single interviewee. It is thought that 'one-on-one' allows the researcher control over the process and the interviewee the freedom to express his or her thoughts. At times, however, the interviewer may require the assistance of a translator or decide to use a note-taker, or video cameraperson. One-on-one interviews are generally face-to-face, but can also be done over the telephone. The advantages

of phone interviewing are researcher convenience and unlimited geographical range. The disadvantages include an inability to read non-verbal cues and less control throughout the interview process.

Group: Group interviews involve interviewing more than one person at a time. This can be done in a formal structured way, or may involve a less structured process where the researcher acts more as a moderator or facilitator than an interviewer. In this less structured approach, interviewees are often referred to as a focus group. Since group interviews can be difficult to follow, they are often taped so that raw data can be sifted through at a later time.

The interview process

As with surveying, conducting a 'good' interview is a process that requires a lot more steps than you may realize. Interviewing involves the need to: plan for all contingencies; prepare an interview schedule and data recording system; run a trial or pilot; modify the process as appropriate; conduct the interviews; and, finally, analyze the data. Box 11.6, which can be used as both a guide and a checklist, outlines the steps involved in interviewing.

Box 11.6 Steps in the Interview Process

PLAN

1. Realistically consider issues of representation and access.
2. Develop a contingency plan in case key interviews fall through.
3. Familiarize yourself with, and plan for, any potential language and/or cultural issues likely to affect the process. Find and trial a good translator if necessary.
4. Consider the presentation of self, including what role you will take and how involved you will be in conversations.
5. Decide approximately how long you think the interviews should take.
6. Make appointments early. Plan travel time, interview time, AND wait around time.

PREPARE AN INTERVIEW SCHEDULE AND DATA RECORDING SYSTEM

7. Draft relevant questions or develop thematic areas to explore.
8. Carefully read any questions and consider whether they might be considered confusing, leading, or problematic in any way for the interviewee.
9. Rewrite the questions in relation to considerations above and run them past a few peers/supervisor for their assessment. Repeat this step as many times as necessary to get each question as right as possible.
10. Attempt to put your questions into an order that is logical and will ease respondents into the interview.

11. Consider and develop any instructions, prompts, or probes you feel are appropriate to the interview.
12. Decide on recording methods. If note-taking, consider/develop a form that can aid this process. If audio or video-taping, be sure to acquire and become familiar with the equipment.

PILOT

13. Attempt a pilot interview with a couple of respondents whose background is similar to those in your 'sample'.
14. Note any difficulties encountered, i.e. access, time taken, pacing, comfort zones, recording/note-taking, roles, objectivity, conversational flow, ambiguities, etc.
15. Get feedback from the interviewees on the above and anything else they wish to discuss.
16. Attempt to make sense of your notes and/or transcribe your data.

MODIFY

17. Make modifications based on your own reflections, the feedback from the interviewees, and the quality of the data generated.
18. If modifications are substantial, start again from step 13.
19. Get ethical clearance for the final interview schedule/question/themes.

INTERVIEW

20. Be on time, set up, and check any equipment.
21. Establish rapport, introduce the study, and discuss 'ethics'.
22. Ease into main questions/themes.
23. Keep on track and/or explore interesting tangents.
24. Manage the process, wind down the interview, and bring to a close.

ANALYZE DATA

25. Turn to Chapter 12 to work through data management and analysis!

Conducting your interview

No matter how well prepared you are for your first interview, you are still likely to feel nervous at the beginning and wish you did things differently at the end. Interviewing is not easy; and I think that's because you are actually trying to do three things at once. First, you are trying to listen to the interviewee and make sense of what they are saying. Second, you are attempting to question, prompt, and probe, in ways that will help you gather the 'best' data. Finally, you are trying to manage the overall process so that you know how much time has passed, how much time is left, how much you still need to cover, and how you might move it all forward.

There is a real skill to conducting a good interview. But if you are aware of the key issues (outlined below) and are able to reflect on your experiences, it is a skill that can develop over time.

Presentation of self

It's not just a matter of what you say, but it's how you say it and how you present yourself in general. Whether it be appearance, demeanour, or the words you use, you will usually need to strike a balance between formality and rapport. For example, think about your appearance. Is your interview style/goal better suited to formality or is it one more suited to developing a sense of comfort where matching the attire of your respondent may make more inroads than going conventional? Of course if you are too causal, you run the risk of looking non-professional.

There is also the issue of body language. As you probably know, a whole lot of everyday communication is non-verbal; and just as you will read the non-verbal cues of your respondents, your respondents will be reading your own non-verbal cues. The SOLER model (Egan 1994) provides a framework that allows you to consider how your own body language might affect the communication process, while simultaneously allowing you to assess your respondent's level of ease and comfort. The SOLER elements are:

Square on – if you are both facing each other it connotes that you are paying full attention.
Open posture – for the interviewer this indicates a willingness to accept, for the interviewee it is a posture that suggests they are non-defensive.
Lean forward – shows involvement and interest – too far forward, however, can be read as aggressive.
Eye contact – this varies by culture, but little eye contact generally means little interest, while too much can be unnerving.
Relax – this refers to a relaxed flow of information accompanied by smooth and non-jerky movements.

Preliminaries

A fair few things need to be attended to before you even ask your first question. Preliminaries include the need to:

- *BE ON TIME!* – if you keep someone waiting, building rapport can be a nightmare. Miss an appointment altogether, and you may not get a second chance.
- *Set up and check equipment* – if you think this will require a significant amount of time, organize in advance. If not, do it quickly and efficiently while you establish rapport.
- *Establish rapport* – this includes the introduction, handshake, small talk, and expressions of appreciation. This is a crucial step, but doesn't have to take a lot of time.
- *Introduce the study* – this includes reviewing who you are; the purpose of the study; why his or her involvement is important; and approximately how long the interview will take.
- *Explain ethics* – this generally involves assurances of confidentiality, the right to decline to answer any particular questions, and the right to end the interview upon request.

The questioning process

When it comes to interviewing, you generally get a lot of advice on what to say and how to say it, but much more important is your listening skills. Perhaps the golden rule of interviewing is to:

Listen more than talk

The main game in interviewing is to facilitate an interviewee's ability to answer. This involves easing respondents into the interview by asking the right questions; prompting and probing appropriately; keeping it moving; and finally winding it down when the time is right.

- *Easing your respondents into the interview* – as with surveying, it is important to ease into main questions and themes. If you start off with a 'sensitive' question or one that might be considered threatening, you may find yourself facing an uphill battle for the remainder of the interview. In fact, it can be easy to get an interviewee off-side, so it's well worth considering how you might handle such a situation.
- *Ask strategic questions* – this refers to asking questions that can open up conversations and draw out rich responses. Peavey (2003) suggests that this requires questions that create possibilities, open up options, avoid yes/no answers, dig below the surface, and lower defences by avoiding any tone of judgement. Strategic questions also avoid the pitfalls of leading, offending, or confusing respondents. Box 11.3, earlier in this chapter, provides a fuller discussion and examples of problematic questions.
- *Keep it flowing* – this involves the use of prompts (giving the interviewee some ideas that might jog a response) and probes (comments and questions that help you dig for more, i.e. 'tell me more', 'really', or 'why'). Sometimes probes can be an inquisitive look or a few moments of silence.
- *Keep on track/explore tangents* – if you have a limited amount of time and your interview is quite structured, you will want to make sure you are keeping your interviewee on track and moving at a decent pace. You may find yourself saying, 'That's really interesting, but I really want to know more about …', 'When you mentioned …' If your interview is less structured, you may find yourself wanting to explore interesting tangents as they develop. The trick here is to be mindful of the time and be sure you end the interview with the full range of data you aimed to gather.
- *Be true to your role* – how you keep it flowing, keep it on track, or explore tangents needs to be considered in light of the role you have chosen to adopt as an interviewer. If you are using a formal procedure and working towards objectivity, you will want to use standardized prompts and probes, and will need to consider how you can direct the process without directing responses. On the other hand, if you accept that your own subjectivities will be part of the interviewing process, you will need to consider and openly report how your engagement in the process might influence a conversation.
- *Wind down/close* – there is generally a flow to an interview that ends with wind down and closure. The wind down involves questions that 'round off' an interview and asks respondents if there is anything else they would like to cover, contribute, or clarify. The interview then ends by thanking your interviewee and asking if it might be possible to contact him or her again if you need to ask any further questions or need to clarify any points.

Recording responses

You may be adept at asking good questions, and in fact be an exceptional listener, but if you can't read your own handwriting or make heads or tales of your recordings … you are in a whole lot of trouble. Recording responses can be done in a number of ways; you may need to trial a couple of recording methods in order to assess what is best for you and your research process.

- *Note-taking* – this can range from highly structured to open and interpretative. Highly structured note-taking often utilizes a form that can be filled in as the interviewee speaks. It may even include a list of codes for common responses. On the other end of the spectrum is unstructured note-taking that may take the form of a concept map or involve jotting down interpretative ideas directly after an interview. Remember that if you're going to take notes during an interview, be sure you practise talking, listening, and note-taking simultaneously – and that you can read your own writing. You also need to keep in mind that note-taking is actually a preliminary form of analysis that does not provide raw data, and that you may want to consider taking notes in conjunction with audio/video recording.
- *Audio recording* – audio recording allows you to preserve raw data for review at a later date. It therefore allows you to focus on the question/answer process at hand. The disadvantages of taping are: the unease it can cause for the interviewee; its inability to capture non-verbal cues; the fallibility of equipment (see Box 11.7); and the enormous time and financial cost of transcribing data.
- *Video taping* – video-taping offers the added bonus of being able to record visual cues, but is more intrusive, is prone to more technical difficulties, and can generate data that is hard to analyze.

Box 11.7 *Tape-recording Dilemmas*

SOME THINGS YOU DON'T WANT TO FIND YOURSELF SAYING…

To your interviewee:

- 'Oh jeez, wait – hold on. I don't think the silly thing's recording.'
- 'Sorry, but I didn't realize the tape finished, do you mind repeating everything you said for, let's see … the last 43 minutes.'

To yourself:

- 'Damn – all I can hear is that stupid lawnmower.'
- 'I knew I should have stopped at the 7–11 for more batteries.'
- 'Oh nooo. … I think I recorded over the interview I did last week.'

AND ONE THING YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER SAYING...

To your interviewee when you are sensing 'wariness':

- 'Would you feel more comfortable if I turned it off and just took notes?'

A note on translators

Finally, a quick note on translators. If you need to use a translator, there are a number of issues you will need to consider in the quest for credible data. First, you need to make sure your translator is experienced. Just being bilingual doesn't guarantee the necessary skills – be sure to trial and/or seek references. You then need to decide how you will use the translator. Will you ask them to translate your questions literally, or would you like them to use their own judgement in an attempt to convey your meaning? Will they translate for the interviewee during the interview, or will you tape the interviewee in their native language and have the translator transcribe into English at a later time? You also need to think through issues of structure and formality. Gaining casual rapport or being highly flexible can be tough to do through a translator. There are no easy answers here, and perhaps the best advice is that you definitely need to have a run through. This is probably the only way to assess whether your translation process is going to work for you.

OBSERVATION

Observation is a word we might use on any given day, in any multitude of situations. In day-to-day language, *to observe* means 'to watch or notice', while *observation* refers to 'the act of watching or noticing'. The problem is that these day-to-day definitions cannot be directly transferred to the world of research methods. As a methods term, 'observation' needs to be identified as a systematic methodology; while the term 'observe' needs to connote more than input from just visual cues.

Observation: A systematic method of data collection that relies on a researcher's ability to gather data through his or her senses.

Observe: To notice, using a full range of appropriate senses. To see, hear, feel, taste, and smell.

What you see isn't always what you get

Because students are often familiar with the general concept of observation, they tend to think that conducting an observational study will be pretty straightforward.

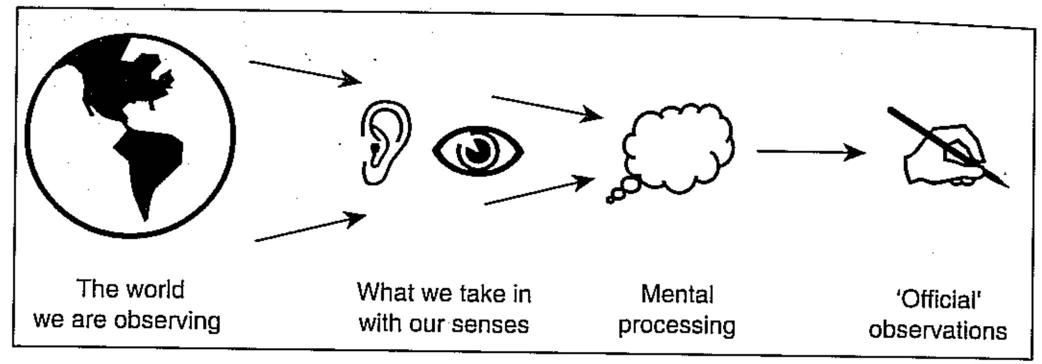

FIGURE 11.1 FILTERING OBSERVATIONS

They will simply observe and take note of what is happening in a given situation or context. What I try to stress to these students is that observation needs to be considered a systematic data collection method. The challenge is taking something done on a daily basis and converting it into a rigorous research tool. This can be quite difficult because observation requires that researchers continually consider and negotiate how their own inherent biases might: (1) colour their observations; and (2) have a potential impact on the observed.

You and you alone

A major obstacle in the quest for credible data through observation is the way in which your own history, biases, interests, experiences, and expectations can colour what you observe. As highlighted in Figure 11.1, a world exists that we observe. That world is narrowed by what we can manage to take in of it through our senses. Sensory input is then filtered and processed by a brain that has been socialized into thinking and understanding through very structured, defined, and indeed limited frameworks. Finally, our constructed understandings are condensed into our official observations. This process puts a lot of responsibility for the generation of credible data squarely on the thought processes of the researcher, and highlights the need for observational studies to be systematically planned and, if possible, confirmed through the use of other methods.

You and them

Do people ever act the same when they know they are being observed? What are the ethics of observing people without telling them? Are there any potential threats posed to researchers who immerse themselves into the cultures they are observing? The respective answers to these questions are not really, highly suspect, and lots. The more entwined you become with the researched, the more difficult it is to navigate the process. Box 11.8 gives a nice example of the difficulties researchers can face when they observe without reflexive consideration of their own impact and positioning.